What Trump's Campaign Speeches Show About His Lasting Appeal to the White Working Class

Lamont et al – FINAL Forthcoming, Harvard Business Review

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Dek: The idea of "friends and foes" is central to his communication.

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The enduring loyalty of many U.S. white working class voters toward President Trump has puzzled many political pundits. A Quinnipiac University Poll suggests that as of October 11, 55% of white people without college degrees approved of Trump's handling of his job, compared to 38% in the total population. The approval rate from the white working class has held steady throughout his first year in office (it was 52% the week after his inauguration). At the same time, his overall disapproval rating among all voters has risen from 44% to 56%.

Why was there such lasting loyalty from this particular group -- low-status white collar workers and blue collar workers with no college education?

We began to explore this question by looking back to Trump's rhetoric during the 2016 presidential campaign, when this group coalesced as the core of his political base. The full results of our study are available in the latest issue of the *British Journal of Sociology*. We focused on his electoral speeches, as these are particularly telling of his vision of society and of his intended friends and foes. Friends and foes are central to his communication strategy, and also a central part of what sociologists call "symbolic boundaries" (or "boundary work,") that is, to the distinctions we draw to categorize and evaluate various types of people.

The text of Trump's campaign speeches gave us a detailed and extensive dataset through which to examine this boundary work. This is particularly important given that driving and accentuating distinctions between segments of the population is central to Trump's presidential style and to the appeal he exercises on his base.

Our detailed, computer-assisted content analysis of 73 of Trump's speeches, accessed through the American Presidency Project, sheds light on his overall communication strategy. We looked at the words he used most commonly, and how he used those words (positively or negatively). We then examined how Trump spoke (both negatively and positively) about various groups throughout the campaign and studied the exclusionary discourse he deployed in his bid for the White House. We focused on his references to groups such as African Americans, Hispanic Americans, "legal" and "illegal" immigrants, Muslims, refugees, the poor, women, and the LGBTQ community. What we found shows a consistent approach to leadership communication.

What Trump's Rhetoric Tell Us About His Communication Patterns

From our analysis of Trump's speeches, we can identify three pillars of his rhetorical strategy still in use by him today.

Moral absolution for his base of supporters, white workers without college degrees. We established that the word "workers" appeared more frequently in Trump's stump speeches than references to any other social category (except "donors"), and that these references were overwhelmingly positive. Most importantly, Trump addressed workers' concerns about their downward position in the national pecking order by removing blame from them. Previous research by one of us (Michèle) has found that being hardworking, responsible, and providing are the three most salient moral traits of both white and black working class people. Being unemployed or underemployed is thus, for many in the working class, not only an economic catastrophe but also a moral one. Trump's rhetoric assuaged that sense of moral guilt.

More specifically, he repeatedly blamed globalization for deindustrialization, thus supporting workers' self-concepts as responsible, hard-working people who have fallen on hard times through no fault of their own. He also highlighted the structural character of economic transformations in rural and urban America, and promised to create "jobs, jobs, jobs" as the key to restoring these workers' wounded pride and improving their economic situations.

Clear "foes" that can be redefined on the fly. In removing moral blame for unemployment from some workers, Trump also systematically applied it to others. Most frequently, this "foe" was immigrant workers. While drawing a clear boundary around native-born workers, Trump often blurred the boundary between documented ("legal") and undocumented ("illegal") immigrants. He also consistently referred negatively to Muslims and refugees fleeing the Syrian crisis. He explicitly described immigrant groups as taking jobs away from American workers and as claiming benefits like Social Security, which should instead go to more deserving citizens who have paid into those programs. By targeting these groups as scapegoats, Trump also reaffirmed workers' self-concept as the pillars of American society, at the same time as he discredited immigrants whom workers perceived to be their primary competitors in a fragile labor market. He also channeled workers' anger toward established politicians (and Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton in particular) for failing to protect the American economy.

More recently, Trump has emphasized a cultural message rather than an economic one. For example, defending the tradition of wishing people "Merry Christmas" (rather than the more secular "Happy Holidays") and attacking NFL players for kneeling during the national anthem as a protest against police violence against black people. This is another way that he redraws the boundaries around certain groups – for example, pitting mostly black NFL players, against their patriotic, largely white working class supporters. Boundary work like this is also what turns something like an innocuous seasonal greeting into a fraught political statement.

Trump is also able to both include and stigmatize certain groups at the same time, instinctively drawing, redrawing, and blurring the boundaries between groups. For example, he frequently mentioned the need to protect *all* Americans from crime in the

"inner city," which in America has tended to be a code for "black neighborhoods." As others have noted, this is a linguistic "dog whistle" that allows a speaker to *explicitly* include a group (as worthy of protection from crime) while *implicitly* stigmatizing that group (as causing that crime).

Trump has used a slightly different boundary-blending strategy since his inauguration. When a protest in Charlottesville ended with a white supremacist driving a car into a crowd and killing one person, he condemned the violence "on many sides," a way of erasing the boundary between the white supremacist protesters and the anti-racist protestors marching against them and of excusing the supremacists.

An emphasis on specific, shared class values. In the same body of work that identified hard work, responsibility, and being a provider as salient moral dimensions among the white working class, Michèle also found that being a protector, having integrity, and being straightforward were important secondary moral values. (In Money, Morals and Manners, this author shows that members of the professional class often value these things too, but put a higher premium on things like self-actualization, being a team player, and avoiding conflict.)

Trump leaned heavily on shared working-class values in his campaign speeches, often in the context of a threatened America. For example, he often portrayed immigrants, Muslims, and refugees as direct threats to the safety and well-being of women and children. He depicted these latter groups as in need of protection against the threat presented by Islam, particularly with regards to individual freedom and other human rights. He also repeatedly affirmed that these same workers needed to protect LGBTQ people from the intolerance he associated with Islam. Thus, he made salient the masculinity of white male workers, their role as providers and protectors, which are one of the lynchpins of their self-worth. Trump also typically described African Americans and Hispanic Americans as Americans whose jobs and safety are in need of protection against globalization.

What Trump's Continued Support Tells Us About a Changing Electorate

Trump's framing of these various groups in his electoral speeches is especially noteworthy because of the strong contrast to how white workers perceived these same groups in previous decades. In *The Dignity of Working Men*, Michèle investigated the boundaries that working class Americans living in the New York suburbs drew toward various groups in the early 1990s using in-depth interviews. She found that African Americans and the poor were frequently singled out by workers as having a lack of self-reliance and a poor work ethic. White workers hardly talked about immigrants at all.

What could explain these shifts? Two factors are particularly noteworthy: After the passage of welfare reform in the 1990s (particularly the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act), and following the 2008 economic recession, workers became less concerned with the poor (the welfare-to-work law forced the unemployed to work in order to receive state support). They became more concerned

with those coming into the country to “take our jobs.” Post-9/11 anxieties fed their patriotic enthusiasm, which became a source of high status and pride, especially in a context where their honor as responsible breadwinners and hard-working people was threatened by economic decline. Together with the 2008 recession, this patriotism fostered stronger xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment. Trump’s electoral speeches were thus perfectly calibrated to resonate with white American workers given their difficult position in 2016.

The resonance of these speeches was also made possible by the declining influence of unions, which have lost their cultural impact in conveying to workers where their material class interest lies as well as in anchoring their sense of belonging and pride in being “labor.” Trump provides these same workers alternative frames to make sense of their downward economic mobility and a blueprint for how to fight back against their sense of growing social marginality (as captured by the defense of “Merry Christmas”) in the context of a declining America. The lasting loyalty of this group to Trump may be due in no small part to the continued resonance of Trump’s rhetoric with their current predicament, as their economic position remains weak and their social status even weaker.

How to reach these voters remains one of the greatest conundrums facing progressive forces today, in a context where the U.S. media are increasingly structured around silos that feed political echo chambers. Trump, known as a master marketer, is betting against this happening, and he may well be winning that bet.